

EDITORIAL

Last month we commented on a story from Italy about burglars disabling their victims with narcotic sprays. Italian ufologist and folklorist Edoardo Russo assures us that such incidents really happen (see Letter). Now we have similar reports from South Africa. According to *The Sunday Telegraph* (30 July 2000) housebreakers in Durban use a concoction made from ingredients including hyenas' tails to 'smoke out their victims' houses before ransacking them as their occupants lie unconscious'. These burglaries take place in Durban's 'wealthy white suburbs'. Now we don't know what to believe about such stories.

LITERARY CRITICISM

Stanley L. Jaki. *God and the Sun at Fatima*, Real View Books, 1999

Stanley Jaki's books have long impressed me. They are invariably so erudite that, even if you disagree with him, you can't help but learn many facts and insights from reading him. The news that he had come out with a book on Fatima was especially welcome. The literature I had seen on it always had a sensationalistic attitude and there was absolutely no care to sift fact from fiction. Jaki has done this immense task. We finally find gathered here the first-person testimonies of people present at the miracle of the sun on 13 October 1917. They are given a first-rate dissection along standard historical principles - the earliest accounts are given greatest weight, the credentials of the witnesses are assessed, the differences are scrutinised with an eye to their possible utility or harm in understanding what happened. He offers spirited commentary over earlier interpretations and offers a hypothesis about what may have happened that day.

One feature Jaki repeatedly points out about the event is that while it is undeniable that tens of thousands were present, there was an embarrassing indifference among Fatima devotees to gather testimony of the miracle concerning the sun. A commission studying for 8 years the Marian apparitions of the children looked into the credentials of the trustworthiness of the children, their parents, and relatives, but contained not one word on the miracle involving the falling sun. *The Voice of Fatima* devoted to spreading the message of Fatima published hundreds of issues in the 1930s but barely mentioned the solar miracle in any of its issues. One of the first books devoted to Fatima has the unlikely seeming title of *The Miraculous Cloud of Fume*. The author was obsessed by some wisps of smoke present at the various apparitions that he deemed beyond natural explanation.

This baffling inattention and silence on what is now regarded as one of the most puzzling mysteries in the museum of Fortean oddities - it has even been improbably called the greatest UFO case of all time - drives Jaki to distraction. Isn't it the duty of all responsible intellectuals to ascertain the facts of an event? Gather the witnesses, push for details, probe, get the precise meanings of what they said. Little of this happened. It was decades before any concerted push for testimony was made and by then time had eroded its value. Formulaic expressions had crystallized memories of the event to some extent and false details slipped in. One witness, 14 years after the event, said he saw the sun zigzagging. Jaki notes this witness had been only 7 at the time of the event. None of the earlier accounts bear this out. Yet this account was picked up by popular writers over others and led to misimpressions. Some ufologists will recall that this detail was picked out as so like 'the falling leaf effect' that Fatima must really have been a UFO. Late witnesses testified the clouds cleared away and the event happened in a blue sky. Earliest accounts however repeatedly said that clouds were present and that one could look directly on the sun because a diaphanous layer of cloud veiled it.

The reticence to probe the event probably baffles Jaki more than most people because of his scholarly scruples. One need not be a cynic to think that the miracle was unnerving to modern

sensibilities. Many people in the crowd feared the sun had detached itself from the firmament and was falling to the earth. Some dropped to their knees in prayer, fearful the sun was falling and that it was the end of the world - the Bible's collapse of the powers of heaven. From the comfort of hindsight, this was pure foolishness. The sun obviously did not rush towards Earth that day. It was a misimpression confined to a small region of Portugal. If you start thinking about this too much it looks like the miracle is, to some degree, a gigantic illusion and not something you might want to attribute to a loving, benevolent God. It does not help that Lucia, the child visionary, stated the Lady took that occasion to proclaim the Portuguese expeditionary force in France would return home soon. That did not happen either.

Jaki feels the evidence points strongly to the solar miracle being an illusion with a strong meteorological component. The diaphanous veil of clouds is clearly responsible for people being able to look upon the sun with the naked eye. His notions about the precise mechanics of other details of the solar miracle however look pretty doubtful. Jaki calls upon Donald Menzel's discussions of lenses of air to try to account for the falling of the sun, but he seems to misunderstand the process. Menzel was accounting for the image of a car jumping forward by means of layers of heated air lying horizontal and parallel to the earth. The solar miracle involved an image of the sun at local high noon and you can't plausibly argue that a lens of air can form along a line of sight that has such a high angle.

Jaki would have benefited from an awareness of William Corliss's *Rare Halos, Mirages, Anomalous Rainbows*. Some of the miracle recalls things like jumping halos, bishop's rings, and kaleidoscopic sun displays. Indeed Corliss himself very briefly mentions Fatima in his Kaleidoscopic Suns section. I'm inclined to think varying populations of ice crystals or other aerial impurities account for the illusion of movement along the line of sight. The rotating rays of the display sound like maybe crepuscular sun shadows of high clouds above the mist layer. Such clouds were mentioned in an early account. Jaki was uncomfortable over Strangfeld's suggestion that the spinning sun was related to the physiology of the retina, but the observation seems perfectly sound and applicable. At a certain level of brilliance just before the light becomes uncomfortable, the retina does process the sun's light in a manner that makes it appear to spin. I can't say I really understand it, I only know from personal experience it is true. This also makes more sense of those instances of people who later said they saw repetition of the miracles at other times. If they were thinking just in terms of being able to watch the sun spin without averting the eye, such repeat performances are easily believed. The motions of the sun described in the early accounts may be interpretable in terms of a mix of autokinesis, autostasis, and surrounding cloud motion.

Jaki believes that the meteorological nature of the solar miracle does not detract from its miraculous character. Miracles in the Bible probably result from God working through natural laws rather than in violation of them. So, too, Fatima. The proof of the miraculous nature of the October 13 event was that the child visionaries predicted there would be a miracle at the time they predicted. It was the reason tens of thousands of people had gathered in the Cova de Iria. It would have been a bit more impressive had they said in advance that the miracle would involve the sun. One of those present had expected the stars would become visible; another who witnessed the miracle didn't realize it was supposed to be a miracle. Still, one can't deny there is an element of coincidence in the timing of this meteorological marvel that provokes an element of wonder. When one looks back on it though, the meaning is elusive. What is really served in a powerful being sending an illusion of the falling sun to terrify and inspire awe in a mass of faithful and unfaithful listeners to the message of Mary? Miraculous cures have a pragmatic dimension easier to revere.

Whatever disagreements one may have with Jaki's opinions, it must be said without reservation that this is a valuable state-of-the-art history of the solar miracle that has no peer. Anyone who writes about the Fatima solar miracle in the future without citing this book can be dismissed.

Martin Kottmeyer

Loren Coleman and Jerome Clark. *Cryptozoology A-Z*, Simon and Schuster, 1999. £11.99
 Paul Harrison. *The Encyclopedia of the Loch Ness Monster*, Robert Hale, 1999. £14.99
 W. Haden Blackman. *The Field Guide to North American Monsters*, Three Rivers Press, 1998. £9.99

These three encyclopedias reflect differing approaches to cryptozoology; of them the Coleman/Clark is by far the most scholarly, following Jerry Clark's similar encyclopedias on ufology and forteana, with illustrated articles on a wide range of 'unknown animals' along with the people and organisations that search for them. There is a comprehensive bibliography.

Yet this book has real problems, mainly, I suspect, stemming from Loren Coleman's association with the International Society of Cryptozoology, an organisation which in many ways has aspects of a Bernard Heuvelmans appreciation society, where the ideas and world view (in which cryptids are real flesh and blood, pelt and paws animals, rather than inhabitants of the goblin universe of the human imagination) of the pioneer are not to be challenged. A reverential tone towards Heuvelmans, and to a lesser extent towards Ivan T. Sanderson, are adopted here, and opposing or sceptical viewpoints are not presented. This I think is the real problem; instead of opposing or sceptical viewpoints being presented and challenged here, they are simply ignored. This even extends to Loren Coleman's own excellent sceptical re-evaluation of the Loy's ape fiasco, and his suggestion that some early bigfoot reports were hoaxes.

It may also explain the eccentricities of the biographical entries, which feature entries for some fairly obscure American cryptozoologists, but does not provide separate biographical entries for such figures such as pioneers Rupert T. Gould, Charles Gould, Constance Whyte, Ralph Izzard, Charles Stonor, Frank Lane, or modern figures such as Ulrich Magin, Michel Meuger, Graham McEwan or Jonathan Downes. Also missing is the bigfoot pioneer Peter Byrne, who seems to have become a non-person after some ideological dispute with Rene Dahinden, a guy who shared Stanton Friedman's penchant for threatening to sue colleagues for libel.

Paul Harrison's encyclopedia on the Loch Ness Monster is by no means as authoritative as Coleman's. Harrison is a former police sergeant who has turned to Nessie hunting from studying Jack the Ripper, where he received egg on his face when a book he wrote on that subject confused two people with the same name. His encyclopedia is a more modest affair; most entries refer to individual witnesses which, as John Rimmer said on another occasion, is all well and good if you know the witnesses' names already. I must say, however, that it does bring a mass of material together.

Harrison would no doubt like to agree with Coleman, given the various digs at sceptics throughout his book; but he is honest enough to record that all the most detailed monster photographs have turned out to be hoaxes (It's Loren Coleman here who has egg on his face for refusing to accept the hoax explanation of the surgeon's photograph); and that there are real problems about LNM sightings being accounted for by any one sort of animal, something which becomes very apparent when looking through the diverse accounts of land sightings chronicled here.

An anecdote told by Harrison suggests that to many witnesses and other people Nessie is something other than a 'normal' flesh and blood animal. Relatives of his who were North Sea fisherman, and had presumably braved force 10 gales on several occasions barely batting an eyelid, refuse to take their boat on a short cut through Loch Ness at night in case they meet the monster: 'There is no way I would want to cross that Loch after darkness; something peculiar is in there - large and not of the twentieth century. We should let it be.'

Here we are close to Andy Roberts's ideas about the 'Big Grey Man of Ben MacDhui', that these monsters are symbols of the 'absolute otherness' of wild nature, zones of total non-human wilderness where people are intruders. This is more in keeping with the folkloric treatment of monsters in Blackman's light-hearted survey of American monster lore. Blackman, by presenting the monsters of modern cryptozoology, Native American tradition, cowboy humour and modern urban legend together, emphasises their common origin, creatures of the darkness beyond the camp fire and the wilderness under a child's bed. Blackman sees, as do Machin and Meuger, modern cryptids as the secularised, naturalised descendants of the cosmic beasts such as Wendigo, heart of ice, summoner of storms, caller of beasts from the forests, symbols of the raw power of wild nature, the utterly implacable force of creation and destruction, from which human beings strive to carve a secure home.

Of course, both Blackman and Coleman may be right, there are plenty of real animals such as wolves, snakes, hyenas and the like which are also wild beasts of the imagination. But these real animals are losing their symbolic power: today we are told that wolves are big cuddly doggies and TV envisions dinosaur pups as being as cute as Bambi; we have to look elsewhere for the monsters our imaginations need. Sometimes we see them in wild storms, scurrying clouds, overflowing rivers, but all too often we see them in the faces of strangers. If some cryptids are downfallen gods, others are dehumanised people. When imperialist aggressors of all races decide some stranger is in the way of the land they want for themselves, they turn them into subhuman 'beasts in human shape' as happened to the Niattawo of Sri Lanka or the Chuchunaa of Siberia. If every Australian aboriginal had been massacred by 1850, and they remained only as dehumanised figures in folklore, would they not now be the subject of cryptozoology, becoming more bestial still in the process?

The ease by which covert racist fantasies, such as that Neanderthal people were hairy and had dark skins - assertions for which there is no evidence whatsoever - creep into the cryptozoology of such impeccably liberal figures as Loren Coleman. Of course, artists like Burian drew Neanderthals as dark and hairy, because that's how European racists envisaged the 'primitive', and the ease with which cryptozoologists mythologise the third world as a 'primeval' wildness where dinosaurs may be found round any corner, and the 'natives' have never seen a picture of one in a book, should give us pause for thought.

Peter Rogerson

Robert M. Youngerson. *The Madness of Prince Hamlet and Other Extraordinary States of Mind*, Robinson, 1999. £7.99

This is a collection of very short articles on, for the most part, a variety of curious mental states, such as Munchausen syndrome, Capgras syndrome (the belief that members of your family and friends have been replaced by doubles), Cotart syndrome (belief that you and/or the world is dead), etc. There are sceptical but superficial looks at some paranormal topics such as superstition, mediumship, near-death experiences and alien abductions. As with many sceptics there is a tendency to cop out of some of the more puzzling evidence, for example in the chapter on mediumship he quotes the so called Uncle Jerry case, in which the medium Mrs Piper gave Sir Oliver Lodge some information about a dead uncle, which one of the surviving brothers could not remember, but another could, but does not seek to provide any explanation, just scooting off into much easier generalisations. While some of the articles are quite fascinating, there is also a fair amount of rather dull padding.

Peter Rogerson

Sergio Della Sala. *Mind Myths: Exploring Popular Assumptions about the Mind and the Brain*, John Wiley, 1999

Della Sala has assembled a multinational team to produce a series of largely sceptical pieces, examining a range of popular beliefs about the mind and brain. While chiefly aimed at students and fellow professionals, most of the contributions will be accessible to the lay reader. They include studies of topics familiar to *Magonia* readers such as near-death experiences, hypnosis, false memories, the paranormal (including a piece on conjurers' methods by Randi, though I sometimes wonder whether the willingness of many sceptics to take everything Randi says at face value is not itself a form of credulity). Other topics such as the role of the placebo (did you know that you can get the nasty side affects from placebos also), tracing the origin of the myth of 'we only use 10% of our brain', and a critique of the myth of the right hemisphere of the brain, will be of less familiarity. I would recommend the various articles on different brain stimulation machines and techniques, and on the role of advertising, for some prime examples of pseudoscience. While some of the topics have indeed been well covered elsewhere, the chief value in this book probably lies in the assemblage of critical material on a variety of topics together.

Peter Rogerson

LETTER

The story of burglars using narcotic gases is implausible, indeed. Yet it's a rather frequent fashion for robbers in Italy, nowadays.

I admit having long disbelieved such stories, and collected them for our own 'urban legends' file, as well as the 'hypnotizing robber' of a few years ago.

But I have to testify that it's now established as a recurrent fact, in more than just one town. Italian newspapers are not only reporting testimonies, but also comments by the police and even details of which gases or sprays are being used (non-Italians are blamed, usually Slavs or Gypsies).

Exactly one year ago, it happened in my own house. At 1 a.m. a lone thief climbed along the balconies and tried each and every floor, beginning with the second one and up to the ninth. He sprayed gas into every open window he found, and he managed to enter at least three different apartments, stealing watches, cellular phones, money and jewels readily available. He was casually discovered by a young man at the ninth floor, who had him run through the window and shouted for help from the balcony (so that the thief was actually seen descending and jumping to the ground by another resident on the opposite side of the road). The youth's parents had difficulties in rising from their bed, but nausea, sleeplessness and other troubles were reported by people at the eighth, sixth, fourth and second floors, too (the dog on the second remained strangely asleep all the following morning). The young lady on the eighth floor found her phone and watch missing, plus a strong headache and also found strange sticky footprints inside her room.

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